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ABSTRACT

Research and intervention on burnout have focused on the worker and the work setting. Since these factors are influenced by social, political and economic forces in society, alienation or burnout in the human services requires critical examination in a larger context, especially the history of the human services prior to 1976 when concern about job stress became popular. Events of the 1960's, specifically the establishment of social programs with unrealistic expectations for eradicating poverty or eliminating educational inequities, coupled with our society's cultural ambivalence about social welfare, contributed to the lack of resources, large caseloads and bureaucratic hassles that are common sources of burnout. The time involved in generating and coordinating required and often meaningless data is also a common cause of burnout in service providers. During the 1970's public concern shifted from social welfare to energy and economics. The decreased importance of human services reduced the availability of human service jobs, making lack of job mobility and burnout likely responses to job stress. Based on this analysis, two implications emerge for reducing burnout in the human services: to be effective, change efforts must be directed at social attitudes and political dynamics; and these efforts must be based on a valid analysis of the causes of the burnout problem. (MCF)

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The Context for the Emergence of Burnout as a Social Problem

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Although most research and intervention on burnout has focused on the worker and the work setting, these factors are strongly influenced by social, political, and economic forces in society. Elsewhere, I have identified several particularly important historical trends of the last half century that culminated in the emergence of burnout as a social problem (Cherniss, 1982). In this paper, I would like to examine in more depth one of these trends: the steady decline in public support for, and interest in, the human services during the early seventies. Burnout emerged first in the human services and then spread to other areas. It was in the human services that concern about job stress and loss of commitment initially became popular around 1976. Thus, while the problem is by no means unique to human service workers (or even to the work role), it makes sense to look at what was happening in the human services prior to 1976 in order to better understand why the problem has become so prominent. Also, if we are to be successful in alleviating burnout in the human services, it is critical that we address the larger social and political context in which workers and agencies operate.

The Legacy of the Sixties

When the history of the human services (education, social work, mental health, etc.) is written in the year 2000, the 1960s undoubtedly will be regarded as a "golden age". As Sarason (1977) has pointed out, society increasingly began to look to the human services for solutions to pressing social problems during the Great Depression of the thirties. Following World War II, there was another period when the human services were asked to help deal with social unrest and dislocation. But no period exceeded the sixties in the amount of popular interest, political support, and financial resources directed towards this sector of our society. To put it bluntly, the human services were where the action was.

One effect of all of the fanfare and support was to raise expections. Looking back now at the promises and the hopes of that era, it is clear that they were unrealistic. The goals, such as eradicating poverty or eliminating educational inequalities, were worthy; but they could not be achieved within the time frame that we implicitly adopted. Also, our assumptions about the nature of the problems, the clients, and the political system were naive. For instance, most of those who became involved in the War on Poverty's community action programs believed either that their advocacy efforts would not be opposed by the local political establishment, or that the precarious coalition that had led to the creation of those programs could defeat the old establishment in any direct confrontation (Moynihan, 1969). We now realize that the creation of many of those exciting programs during that period was merely symbolic, a way of cooling out the political unrest that was occurring in urban ghetto and college campus. Many of the politicians who created the programs never intended that they would do more than buy a few votes and reduce civil disorder.

The Human Services in Perspective

Historically, the human services never have been a priority in our society. Our emphasis on self-reliance and rugged individualism has led to the view that public aid only should be provided as a "safety net" for those at the bottom of society. To be sure, there always has been an altruistic impulse in our efforts to help the poor and disabled. However, there also has been a reluctance to give any recipient "too much", for fear that a "hand-out" might encourage over-dependence. Also, new social programs and even professional fields (e.g., social work) have been created because many people have feared that without them, there would be an intolerable amount of civil unrest and rebellion.

The economic motive also has been prominent. For instance, while there were many humanitarian reasons given for deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals and other "asylums", the hoped-for savings in per diem costs probably were critical in securing political support.[1] Tax payer revolts really are not new. The general public always has resisted paying more taxes for social programs serving the disadvantaged and only has done so when there was the belief that the programs would eventually lead to cost savings.

Thus, many of the programs created during the sixties were largely symbolic gestures that were underfunded and created in ways that would limit their influence on the larger society. Although this symbolic legislation was useful for the politicians (it neutralized political opposition and helped them to get re-elected), it was dysfunctional for clients, service providers, and agency administrators because it raised expectations for service and institutional support without providing either the resources or the mandates necessary to meet those expectations (Dressel, 1981). The result was increasing frustration and stress in human service workers and growing concern about burnout.

The Social Roots of Bureaucratic Hassles

Our cultural ambivalence about social welfare and human service also contributed to another major source of frustration encountered by the thousands of people who became service providers during the sixties: rules, regulations and red tape. Compared to business organizations, human service settings are in many ways far more centralized and hierarchical in decision-making (Pugh, 1973). To be sure, a teacher or psychologist typically is not supervised as closely as an assembly-line worker in an automobile factory; however, the plant manager and his or her middle-level managers usually do have much greater autonomy than administrators in human service settings. Evidence for this comes from an intriguing study of how executives spend their time (Mintzberg, 1973). It found that a public school superintendent spent substantially more

time answering and being accountable to others than did executives in private business concerns. In other words decision-making is more decentralized in most private companies. At almost all levels, managers have greater freedom in budgetary matters and in the development of new programs. They also are given a freer hand in the day-to-day management of their units. For those working on the line, this means that there are fewer layers of bureaucracy that must be penetrated before receiving approval for some initiative.

Obviously, the business world is no paradise; there are constraints, dissatisfaction, and burnout there as well as in the human services. However, the rules, regulations, and paper work that are a significant irritant for human service workers are greater in their settings than one would find in other types of organizations, and one major reason is the general public's attitudes towards the human services. Massive fraud and inefficiency in defense programs causes barely a stir, while much more modest waste or corruption in social welfare programs is sure to generate heated response. Welfare "moms" are villified more than are shady defense contractors. In order to try to root out all waste and corruption in the human services, rules, regulation, and accountability mechanisms are imposed on programs, service providers, and clients. The result is a highly bureaucratic, frustrating working environment for service providers and administrators.

Admittedly, the heavy burden of red tape and bureaucratic controls that now stymies human service workers is not simply a product of punitive public attitudes and vote-grubbing politicians. As I noted in a previous paper (Cherniss, 1982), public scrutiny of professional practices during the sixties revealed many ways in which the human service professions have sought to help themselves at the expense of others. As people in our society became more willing to question and challenge public officials and institutions, these professional abuses were revealed. The typical response was to impose elaborate rules and

procedures to make sure that professionals receiving public money did what they were supposed to do and did not take advantage.

Another historical development that accelerated during the sixties was the increasing "welfarization" of the human services. The Calvinistic attitudes that I have been discussing always have influenced our response to the poor. Public aid, and those who provide it, thus have consistently experienced the adverse working conditions associated with high burnout. Other areas in the human services, such as mental health and special education, were not regarded in quite the same way in the past. However, during the sixties there was increasing concern about underserved populations such as the poor and those with more severe handicaps. Public money was made available to insure that this situation would be corrected. While the goal was a worthy one, the new programs that emerged appeared more like "welfare" than had previous programs. For instance, many community mental health centers were established in less desirable areas of the community in order to provide low cost, publicly subsidized services to many lower-income clients. Programs in other human service fields also seemed to be more like welfare than in the past. Consequently, these fields and those working in them came to take on the stigma previously associated with public aid. As this occurred, critical public scrutiny of the programs increased and financial support was meager.

If the money that was allocated for these programs had been spent instead on defense programs or even human services for middle class clients, there would have been a different attitude towards the programs and a different way of administering them. But because the programs were designed particularly for the poor and disadvantaged, they came to be treated as we treat any welfare program; and the large caseloads, heavy paper work requirements, and elaborate rules and regulations characteristic of welfare programs soon were in place.

The Function and Vicissitudes of Ambiguity

Thus far, I have suggested that our society's traditional attitudes towards those we serve, interacting with events during the sixties, contributed to lack of resources, large caseloads, and the bureaucratic hassles that are common sources of burnout in the human services. The dynamics of the political process also contribute to role strain and burnout in various ways. For instance, heavy amounts of paper work and reliance on meaningless "outcome" statistics, such as number of clients served, can be traced to the politician's need to pass ambiguous legislation (Dressel, 1981). By passing ambiguous legislation, politicians are able to appease many diverse interest groups. However, in doing so, they "pass on the controversial issues of substance to other levels of government where the hard decisions of implementation and regulation must be made (Dressel, 1981, p. 23)". By relying on the data generated by paper work as their measures of success, the politicians can later take credit for "results" that offend almost no one. However, compiling those meaningless figures alienates the service providers and contributes to further burnout.

Also, the more ambiguous the mandate, the more paper work is required to protect agencies from charges that they are not performing adequately. As Dressel (1981, p. 21) put it, "Since goals are ambiguous, it is not clear what specific data are needed for accountability; thus, numerous data must be amassed in case they are needed at some level of the oversight structure".

Fragmentation is another feature of the political system that contributes to bureaucratization, role overload, and excessive paper work. As new "needs" or underserved "populations" are identified through the agitation of professionals and special interest groups, a favored response is to create a new program. This program then develops its own funding and oversight apparatus which is

added to those that already exist in other programs. So for instance, when the Older Americans Act was passed, an entirely new bureaucracy was created to serve the elderly (Dressel, 1981). A particular agency might receive funding from this source as well as from many others. Such an agency, and its service providers, would be accountable to all of the funding sources. Although creation of a new program for the elderly might mean more services for this previously underserved group -- and more funding for the service providers -- the individual service provider pays a cost in the form of more paper work and more rules and regulations that must be followed.

Time also is consumed by the need for coordination among various programs and agencies. A single multi-problem family in a community might be receiving service from a dozen different agencies that are funded by two dozen different sources. If the services are not coordinated, providers probably will work at cross-purposes and there will be much duplication of effort. If services are coordinated, the coordination will take a great deal of time, not to mention the frustration involved in trying to get competing agencies, jealous of their own turf, to cooperate. Thus, the political system's fragmented response to human suffering ultimately results in fragmented service delivery, conflict, ambiguity, and overload for the service provider. During the sixties, this trend greatly accelerated, and so by the mid-seventies, burnout had become a familiar topic.

The Shifting Public Agenda

All of the factors I have discussed so far were operating during the sixties to some degree, but the human services were rapidly expanding. There was new money and a sense of mission about much of what was being done. However, during the seventies public concern shifted to matters of energy and economics. The problems of mental health, poverty, and educational inequality that were of such

urgency during the sixties were not solved, but the public grew tired of them. Also, the threat of civil unrest subsided. And increasingly severe and protracted "stagflation" made people more concerned about their own economic welfare and less concerned about the welfare of others. While the sixties were marked by an increased sensitivity to the plight of the disadvantaged, the seventies aptly came to be called the "Me-Decade" or the "Age of Narcissism". College students became more conservative in their social and political attitudes and were more likely to major in business and engineering than in education or psychology.

As the human services have slipped in perceived importance, jobs no longer are as numerous. Shortages of teachers and psychologists became "gluts" within a few years. There now are fewer good jobs and thus many fewer options for those who are dissatisfied with their present work situation. When service providers are less able to use job mobility as a safety valve, they are more likely to burn out in response to job-related stress and frustration.

What is to be Done?

In this paper, I have identified some of the public attitudes and political processes that contributed to the emergence of burnout as a social problem in the mid-seventies. Anyone familiar with the topics that I discussed will know that I have only scratched the surface. A much more detailed and informed analysis needs to be done.

Unfortunately, most of those who are interested in the problem of burnout focus all of their attention on the individual and organizational factors that most directly contribute to stress and burnout in a human service setting. Their analysis and interventions are ahistorical and do not take into account for the social, political, and economic forces that so significantly shape the quality of work life in the human services. Consequently, any "solutions" to emerge

from such an approach will be inadequate. They may produce short-term, "statistically significant" changes in burnout in isolated studies or projects, but there will be little meaningful lasting change in the incidence or severity of the problem.

If the root causes of a problem exist at the level of societal attitudes and political processes, this is where meaningful intervention must occur. But those who enter a human service occupation are unlikely to focus their energies at that level. Social and political action is risky. It does not pay well or provide much in the way of economic security. And it no longer is "fashionable" as it was during the sixties. It also takes a great deal of time for one to make any real headway, and then results occur only when one works in concert with many others. It is more personally rewarding to just lead a support group and to see some apparent change in attitudes and feelings during the course of a few weeks.

Several years ago I talked to a new graduate student in clinical psychology who had been a student activist as an undergraduate. She said that she decide to come to graduate school because she had become "burned out". She was frustrated with the lack of social and political change. Her political efforts seemed to have made little impact. She had decided that changing society was too big and abstract as a goal. Now she only wanted to become a clinical psychologist and work with troubled individuals. In this role, she believed that she could experience a greater sense of efficacy. I soon lost contact with this student, but I now wonder what happened when she finally did become a clinical psychologist and began finding that her efforts, as well as the lives of her patients, were strongly influenced by those same social forces that she chose to ignore so many years ago.

Some human service providers and social scientists do engage in political

action, especially when their own livelihoods are affected. During the sixties, many mental health professionals frowned upon social action in behalf of clients because they claimed that political activity was not an appropriate role for a professional. Many of these same professionals did not hesitate to become politically active when the issue was compensation for mental health services under national health insurance or Blue Cross. Similarly, social scientists became much less reluctant to engage in political activity when they were threatened with cut-backs in federal spending for research. Suddenly, political activity became more respectable! In this highly competitive and individualistic society, professionals who engage in political activity in support of their own interests are curiously more acceptable than those who engage in political activity in behalf of others.

However, even when researchers and practitioners in psychology have engaged in political action, their approach usually has been to work within the existing framework rather than attempt to change it. So, for instance, unions and professional associations more likely will direct effort into changing rules concerning case loads in a clinic or school, rather than work to change public attitudes that restrict funding and ultimately lead to the higher case loads. In other words, even when we enter the political arena, we tend to focus on the wrong issues and factors. We do not attack the most basic social causes of the problems. Consequently, the more things change, the more they remain the same.

The analysis I have presented in this paper thus has two implications for those who truly with to reduce the incidence of burnout in the human services (or any other areas where burnout is widespread). First, the impact of change efforts directed solely at individuals or single organizations will be minimal; until social attitudes and political dynamics change, the major causes of burn-

out will be untouched. Second, in working at the level of social policy and political action, we must base our efforts on a valid analysis of the problem. I have tried to show in these few minutes that this involves: 1) certain public attitudes about the human services and those who receive them; and 2) the way legislation affecting the human services is written and passed. Thus, an effective strategy for alleviating burnout must include consciousness-raising designed to change those attitudes, and efforts to change the way in which programs are created at the federal, state, and local levels. I hope that some of you will join me in this endeavor.

FOOTNOTE

1. An example: In 1893, Fernald bragged about cutting annual costs for keeping a mentally retarded person in his institution from $300 to $100. He did this by fuller utilization of inmate labor (White and Wolfensberger, 1969). Interestingly, momentum for deinstitutionalization in developmental disabilities increased after the courts ruled that inmates must be paid at least minimum wage for any labor that is not part of their rehabilitation program.

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